Grass

"Only in the context of a totality of the sciences do Jefferson's achievements make sense. This would for instance explain the apparent contradiction of how a man now famed for his contribution to the political sciences... [was also] purportedly the first westerner to fully reconstruct the remains of a prehistoric mammoth. It's more the failing of an over-enthusiastic age than of the man himself that Jefferson seriously believed such antediluvian beasts could have survived until the 1800s in the wilds of the unexplored midwest..."

- D. P. Mann, The Worlds of Thomas Jefferson (1958).

It starts with the President of the United States of America, although we should be clear on exactly what kind of gentleman we're discussing here. Sitting behind the Presidential desk (rosewood, as it happens, and very nice too) is a man whom later generations will call a polymath, a statesman-philosopher, a true product of the enlightenment. Oh yes, this particular President is a creator, with a portfolio that begins "we, the people" and works its way up to a big climax from there. He's also a man who distrusts priests of just about every denomination, which explains much of what's about to happen here; he's got a lot of time for the divine, this one, but mere mortal authority figures get his back up like nothing else on God's Earth. Now, we can't be sure that what we're about to see in this room is bona fide true, because the affairs of the President are traditionally left behind closed doors, and there are some rules even we're expected to follow. But we can put the scene together out of the pieces we know. Call it listening at keyholes. Call it history by degrees.

Mr. Jefferson - Mr. President - sits behind the aforementioned desk, in front of a vast window that looks out onto a garden of grass and cat's-ears, a garden quite specifically designed so as to in no way resemble the three-million square miles of hostile territory beyond it. The light's flooding through the window onto the parquet-and-polish floor, while the President himself is leaning over the books with which he surrounds himself (this being a less literate time, however, "surrounds" makes the number of books involved sound greater than it really is), reaching for his little box of joy. The box is small and off-white, a gift from a visitor whose exact name and purpose Mr. Jefferson can't quite recall; he seems to recollect that it was a woman, probably French (he has no difficulty remembering this, as he's had a head for Frenchwomen ever since a certain remarkable incident in a brothel in Paris... this is another story, and not the only "another story" which will be intercepting us today). History doesn't record what he keeps inside the box, though as we've imagined Mr. Jefferson as a free-thinking nineteenth century gentleman it could be anything from snuff to hashish. Let's give him the benefit of the doubt, and assume it's chewing-tobacco. Undignified as it may seem.

'It has to be done - it must- be done - it is our duty,' he says, as he starts picking at the box's contents. He talks the way he writes, with far too many hyphens and pauses, and he's addressing the two men standing on the other side of his desk. 'If we're to claim these lands for the good of our nation - if we're to prevent them being overrun by jackals and opportunists - if we're to have room in which to breathe, and not fall upon each other as they do in Europe...'

Now, it so happens that Mr. Jefferson's domain has recently grown, thanks to a certain land deal which is not only due to increase his running total of United States, but which will also give him vast tracts of what he believes to be lush and verdant farmland, possibly including that mythical easy route to the Pacific. And the two men who now stand in Mr. Jefferson's office, nodding in solemn agreement, will go down in history as the first men to travel into the heart of this new terrain; or the first to take notes anyway, which is the way history works. Their names are, from left to right, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. As expected.

(This is all quite ridiculous, of course. At least one of these men already belongs to the President's inner circle. If Jefferson wants to brief them on their mission, then he's more likely to do it in a cozy drawing-room with a bottle of Cognac, swapping stories as Lewis lounges on a chaise longue and Clark leans nonchalantly against the fireplace. But how can we resist imagining it this way? The two of them standing to attention before the Presidential desk, being instructed to journey into the dark heart of the Northwest and bring the land under control. No doubt you're already imagining these two great explorers, these two grizzled veterans of the wilderness, walking into the President's office dressed in furs and racoon-skin hats. We need to believe they're going to step out of the briefing and, without even pausing for breath, stride off into the jungles of uncharted America. Such is history.)

Mr. Jefferson is telling the explorers that nobody can say for sure what they'll find in the Northwestern territories. The French who sold him the land have hardly been forthcoming, and the Indians aren't likely to be much help either. The President expects every form of terrain imaginable, from the tropical to the simply peculiar. He's read the greatest naturalists of the age. He has plans to meet with Alexander von Humboldt himself. He's even heard the theories of the Englishman Frere, who claims to have found human remains which blatantly defy the book of Genesis, something Mr. Jefferson greatly appreciates. Oh, yes indeed. As an enlightened gentleman, the President knows the terra incognita Lewis and Clark will find is no Biblical wasteland. It's to be an altogether more rational landscape, filled with all the wonders that biology and geology can produce. A new world, untouched by Church dogma, governed only by the laws of Nature and Nature's God.

This is the point when Mr. Jefferson tells Lewis and Clark about the mammoths. Oddly - seeing as most of this patchwork conversation will be lost to posterity - the part about the mammoths is the one thing the history books do record.

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It starts with the President, but in purely chronological terms the briefing in the office isn't the first thing to actually happen. Just look at this landscape, for example. Nothing behind-closed-doors here. The sky's a color which later generations will be unable to imagine as anything other than a kind of paint, a deep blue, a dark blue, that makes the green, green grass look as though it's glaring in the sunlight. The air's fresh, pre-industrial fresh, the kind of fresh you only get once it's been filtered through the lungs of several million herd animals and a couple of dozen Indian tribes (this is as fresh as nature gets, no doubt about it). The grass clings to the slopes, sticks close to the curves of the land, so the green's only

broken up by the dirt-paths where animals have left their scents behind them like breadcrumb-trails. And mountains? Oh, there are mountains. Just waiting on the horizon, looking as if they'll always be just waiting on the horizon, wherever you stand on the surface of the Earth. Perfect idyll. Perfect Montana.

Timeless, we'd say. But from the President's point of view, we'd have to call it the past. Months before the briefing of Mr. Lewis and Mr. Clark, the white race has already set foot in the Land of the Shining Mountains.

Here she comes now.

Her name's Lucia Cailloux, and at this moment she's running barefoot through the grass, up the side of a slope which seems to have been put there just to warn travellers that the Rockies will be starting soon, and that they'd better get used to moving uphill. An observer would point out that Lucia - whose manner of dress is unusually masculine, but then, that's probably what you'd expect from someone who's spent so much time talking to damned heathen Indians - is technically wearing boots. But that's not how it feels to Lucia. No, she can feel the warm, warm earth between her naked toes, because in her head she's suddenly become an eight-year-old. As a twenty-year-old woman in the service of her government, this is hardly what she's being paid for, but right now her superiors are more than eight-thousand miles away and Lucia can't help but feel she's going to get away with it.

You see, right now she believes she's going somewhere. When she was young, she once ran all the way up the Rue Viande, something of an achievement when you've got child-sized legs and no shoes, because the Rue Viande is a perfect slope and the sheer amount of dirt on it (in those days, anyway, before Napoleon started cleaning it all up) made the road feel like mud in the summer. On that day - running all the way to the tannery, right at the highest point of the street, where the skins were strung up like flags at the top of the world - the junior Lucia could feel the whole world cracking like glass behind her, with the wind ripping through her dirt-blonde hair and the sheer speed (all of, oh, two miles an hour) tearing at her little dress. And as she headed for the tip of that slope, she knew - she knew - she'd look down and see something big and wonderful on the other side, as her reward for running all the way. She knew she'd see the whole world, in all its truth and majesty. The face, if you will, of Nature's God.

She was right, as well. Young Lucia always was a perceptive little witch.

Now the older Lucia, barefoot and booted, knows the same thing. She can quite literally smell it on the wind. At the top of the slope, she stops, so this is the point when we finally see her face in close-up. Dirt-blonde hair ragged around her shoulders, pasty little freckles blistering in the sunlight, the pupils in her big, big eyes getting smaller as she brushes the last few drops of sweat and sunshine away from her forehead. It doesn't really matter whether we're looking at Lucia now or watching the eight-year-old flashback version, because as it turns out her hair's naturally dirt-blonde in color. Twelve years after the Rue Viande, even a clean Lucia looks that way.

Lucia can hear her co-traveller, the Indian, thumping his way up the slope behind her. He calls out to her: 'Quelque chose?'

And Lucia calls back: 'Tout.' (But that's pretty much the last time we'll be hearing her words in their natural spoken tongue.)

So the world spins around us, vertigo-wise, until we can look down on the great grass-covered crater beyond the slope. The dimple in the world, where Nature's God herself has reached down and left a whacking great fingerprint on the landscape. A gentle pit, with slopes of green sunning themselves in the midday heat, letting troughs of rainwater simmer and merge on their skin.

And there at the bottom of it all, the mammoths.

Now Lucia finds herself running again, and for a moment she isn't sure whether it's now her running or then her, until she remembers that on the Rue Viande she never went down the other side of the slope. At the bottom of the basin, the mammoths are grazing. It'd be almost abstract, like seeing drawings of fluffy brown clouds on a painted backdrop, if it weren't for the smell.

(Of course, when the eight-year-old Lucia stood on the other slope, the view was quite different. What she saw was a cartload of corpses, blocking the street while the horseman stopped to flirt with one of the local girls, as if having a cartload of corpses was some kind of aphrodisiac. But then, that was the Revolution for you. C'est la vie, as they say everywhere except Paris.)

That smell's starting to bother Lucia now, because she's remembering the smell of dung on the Rue Viande. She's so busy separating the horse-smell from the mammoth-smell that she doesn't even realize how far inertia's taking her. Gravity drags her to the bottom of the crater, then keeps her going, so before she can think about it she's stumbling over the ridges where the beasts have chewed and trampled away the grass. Pity the poor woman. The second most momentous moment of her life so far, and all she perceives is a series of confusing, ragged-edged images. The red-brown blurs that she knows are impossible animals. The smears of green that mark the walls of the crater, plastered with spoor and crushed plants; and is that a baby there, a baby mammoth, a little smudge of hair trying to stick close to its bigger smudge of a mother...?

This is when things get slightly out of hand. It's when Lucia turns, nearly falling arse over tit in the process, and finds herself staring at the absurdly huge shape which is even now bearing down on her. The bull-mammoth weighs just over seven tons, not that Lucia will ever know it, and when rising up on its hind legs (as it is now) it must be all of fifteen feet high. When it raises its trunk, and opens its mouth, and flexes its massive lungs, you know it's quite capable of destroying anything that threatens its own stomping-ground.

Nonetheless, the first thing Lucia does when faced with this monstrosity is "protect" herself by putting her arms up in front of her face. And they call this the Age of Reason.

* * * * *

There was an Indian. You might have forgotten about him.

He's now standing on the crest of the slope, watching the great beast rear up over the woman who's nominally his employer, though as a product of a non-market culture the Indian considers this "employer" business to be a pile of deershit. The Indian's name (for our purposes, anyway) is Broken Nose, which is not, of course, a "real" Indian name. It was given to him by a group of Frenchmen with especially fat faces, and it was earned after a confrontation at a French trading-post, during which - predictably - the Indian broke a French official's nose. The friends of the unfortunate fat-faced man, being typically European, found this amusing. Being very typically European, "Broken Nose" was their idea of irony. It's apparently supposed to sound like an authentic Indian title, although Broken Nose himself considers it just a good excuse to punch future fat-faced men without them being surprised. Besides, his original Shoshoni name was even more embarrassing.

It has to be said, Broken Nose doesn't have a great interest in the aesthetic. Below him are creatures the American settlers would find unbelievable, which would probably trigger a religious spasm in the Catholics or the Jesuits whom Mr. Jefferson distrusts so much. However, Broken Nose simply finds the beasts stupid-looking, wearing thick wool all over their bodies despite the sunshine. Broken Nose is slightly concerned for his "employer", but he's well aware that she can look after herself.

On the first night of the expedition, when Broken Nose and Mademoiselle Cailloux made camp on the trail from Louisiana - where the Frenchwoman had arrived under the name of "Lucy Pebbles", and bartered for supplies in what sounded to the Indian like a perfect local accent - the two of them talked at length. Or as much as was possible, anyway, given that Broken Nose had been taught French by men who only needed to prime him for certain tasks. Without any due modesty, Broken Nose showed Mme. Cailloux the scar which had been ritually inflicted across his inner thigh (not by his own tribe, but that's another "another story"). And with less regard for her integrity than Broken Nose would have expected from a European woman, Mme. Cailloux bared her torso from her neck to her waist, revealing a scab left by a bullet which she claimed should have killed her, by all the known laws of Nature and science. This began a discussion about the great wars in Europe, about the little tribal elder called Napoleon and the weapons he could muster; guns like those Mme. Cailloux herself carried, but grown so large that they needed huge boats of their own. Broken Nose asked why the Europeans always insisted on fighting with each other, and that gave the Mademoiselle pause for thought.

'Your people fight, don't they?' she said.

Broken Nose told her that this was indeed the case.

'Then why do you do it?' the woman asked.

The obvious answer was "because you tell us to", naturally, but Broken Nose suspected this was missing the point. The reasons seemed to him to be to do with territory, with possessions, with differences in gods...

'No,' said Mme. Cailloux. 'We fight to stop the other tribes becoming whole.'

Broken Nose didn't understand that. He still doesn't, although Mme. Cailloux has assured him that he will, before their mission here is complete. That is, if she doesn't get herself killed by the bull-mammoth.

* * * * *

In all probability, it's impossible to describe how it feels to have a mammoth rearing up over you. Maybe it's like the feeling you get when you lie on your back and watch the stars, and for a moment - just for a moment - you suddenly realize the true size of what you're staring at, as your brain suddenly forgets to force your usual scale of perception onto things. Maybe. It might be interesting to ask Lucia, even though she has even less conception of the distances of stars than the rest of us (but she's probably wise enough to know that Uranus, the furthestflung of the seven planets, is seventeen-hundred-million miles farther away than she'll ever travel).

For the record, the mammoth isn't going to trample her to death. But looking up at the beast now, seeing its great brown-black outline framed against the perfect blue, Lucia feels she's watching the very countenance of Nature's God. As with the cart of corpses on the Rue Viande, it's the little details that really bother her. The strands of crushed grass on the bottom of its big round feet. The curve of its maw, the upturned V-shape that she knows could swallow a man, if not whole, then certainly in no more than two mouthfuls. The chips in its tusks, tiny imperfections in arcs of ivory so long that no matter which way she turns her head, she knows she won't be able to see both tips at once. And then there's its breath. Its terrible and ancient mammoth-breath, washing over her as the animal bellows into her face (one of those things Lucia's never considered until now, and which she's sure the academics who study the bones of these beasts have never considered either).

Yes, these are the things Lucia has trouble coping with. So many little creases and flaws, more than she could catalogue in half a lifetime, let alone in the raw seconds she believes she has left. The beast's stubby-but-oh-so-big front legs peddle the air in front of its body, and then it suddenly finds itself falling.

It doesn't push itself forward as it falls. it doesn't, as it were, attack. It drops to the ground in front of Lucia, not on top of her, and the impact would surely crack the Earth open if the ground here weren't so used to the abuse. This is the way a bull-mammoth warns off the opposition, Lucia's realizing that even as she peels her heart from the roof of her mouth and tries to stop herself falling over (noticing, as an incidental detail, that the smell of sweat which is starting to blot out the dung-scent is hers and not the fault of the herd).

The bull-mammoth is exhausted. It's not a creature built for rearing up on its hind legs, and the only conclusion we - like Lucia - can reach is that it expects strangers to be so intimidated by its mass that it doesn't actually need to follow up the threat. Having made its point, having bellowed its great beef-heart out, it can't do anything more than stand still and get its breath back. Lungs the size of fat children inflate and deflate, inflate and deflate, under a heavy pelt that must be home to entire empires of insects. From four feet above her head, those huge black eyes are staring down at Lucia, as if the thing's daring her to try anything else.

Easy to call it the face of Nature's God. So big, so blatant, that we can only assume it's been put there for a purpose. Which it has, as Lucia well knows. All animals are there for a purpose. Horses are for riding, pigs are for eating. As far as she's concerned, the mammoths are here as a kind of metaphor. These are political animals, hence Mr. Jefferson's interest.

(You must have been wondering, for example, where this herd originates; woolly skins and elephant-blubber hardly seem to fit in around here. The best explanation we can hope for is that a number of mammoths were once the property of Catherine of Russia, she who was known as "The Great" before some idiot in her court started spreading that God-awful story about the horse. Horse or no horse, Catherine had something of a reputation as a witch... a label applied to most efficient female rulers, it's true, but even before her death there were fabulous and revolting stories about the company she liked to keep, and the animal-rites they used to perform. Horses for riding, pigs for eating, trained monkeys for ritual. It's not entirely clear what the link is between the Empress of Russia being a witch and the existence of live mammoths here in what will one day be the State of Montana, although Lucia has heard it said, with maddening vagueness, that one can easily lead to the other. History is full of these logical gaps. Certainly, it's rumored that one such hairy beast was given by Catherine as a gift to George III of England, but that George - half-crazed brute that he was - destroyed the thing in a fight with pit-dogs without even realizing its value. Lucia is secretly of the opinion that if Russia had given such a gift to the French, they probably would have eaten it.)

But Lucia's mammoth just keeps gasping. It's vulnerable now. With its show of strength over, it's got nothing to protect it but its dignity. Gravity has not been kind to these creatures. So when Lucia takes a step forward, the mammoth doesn't even blink; it's impossible to imagine such a blink being anything but a major task, and taking anything less than an afternoon to complete. From the look on its face, we could almost believe it's indignant.

How can we help but try to read its expression? If the mammoths were put here as metaphors, then we can read them any way we like. It's hard not to find meaning in something that big.

There's a stillness now, Lucia regarding the mammoth, the mammoth regarding Lucia. It's only once Lucia has paid her respects to the silence that she raises her hand. The trunk is close enough to touch, and touch it she does. Her fingers run through the tiny brown hairs, across the leathery old skin, over the wrinkles and the patches of dirt. She almost expects the beast to flinch, or to purr like a cat.

It's vulnerable, anybody can see that. Now, and only now, Lucia gets her one big chance to touch the impossible.

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This is what passed between Mme. Cailloux and Broken Nose that morning, after they pulled themselves to their feet at dawn and began the final trek to the place of the mammoths:

Mme. Cailloux spoke of a man called Jefferson, the leader of the colonists who lived off in the eastern lands. Mme. Cailloux explained to Broken Nose that her own tribal leader, Napoleon Short-Arse, had agreed to sell a portion of the land to the aforementioned Jefferson (a notion which, like the "employer" idea, Broken Nose finds profoundly stupid).

'We're afraid,' said the Mademoiselle. 'All of us. Your people. My people.'

Broken Nose told her that his people weren't afraid of anything, which was, in his experience, what the French expected to hear from a stupid Indian.

'There's a saying in Europe,' Mme. Cailloux went on. '"The other man's grass is always greener." We fight for territory. We start wars to acquire the other man's land. Why?'

Broken Nose shrugged. 'More room. For cattle.'

'No,' the Frenchwoman told him. 'It's because we think... we secretly believe... that the other man's land is a paradise. We start to believe there are great secrets there. Secrets we have to know for ourselves. And when we take the land away from him, and we find there's no paradise there... then we tell ourselves it was the other man's kind of paradise. Not ours. You understand?'

'Your people are stupid,' said Broken Nose. (Not entirely true; this is what he believes he said, after the fact, although his training in the French tongue doesn't cover the possibility of him insulting his "employers". In his head, after the fact, he hears the words in his own language.)

'Perhaps,' he imagines that Mme. Cailloux said. 'But it's a matter of warfare. In war, we attack the enemy's resources. If an enemy has supply lines, we cut them. If an enemy has a better kind of weapon, we rid him of it.'

This sounded to Broken Nose like the first sensible thing she'd said.

She went on to explain many things which Broken Nose had either no understanding of or no interest in. She told him, for example, that in the possession of Napoleon Short-Arse there was a length of metal, which purportedly came from a weapon that had been used to cut the flesh of one of the white man's gods "while he hung on the cross", this metal having the power to induce divine visions (of the spirit-world, Broken Nose guessed) in anyone who was scratched by it.

'Imagine such a thing in the power of the Vatican,' the Mademoiselle said, although Broken Nose had no idea what marked these Vatican out from any of the other European tribes. 'The relic would prove them correct. It would show them to be justified in all their beliefs. Thus would their grass become greener, and their state grow stronger. They might even become whole.'

'Whole?' queried Broken Nose.

'I saw the Revolution,' replied Mme. Cailloux. 'I know what happens when people get what they want. Or when they believe they do.'

None of which told Broken Nose anything remotely useful, or even explained the woman's mission to find the mammoths before the land gets passed on to Mr. Jefferson. But now, in what we have to call the present, Broken Nose is trying not to trip over his skin-shod heels as he tumbles down the slope of the crater. Up ahead, he can see Mme. Cailloux, facing the largest of all the mammoths (or is it just the closest?). He can see the woman resting her hand on the monster's trunk, and he can see the beast keeping quite still, something which his fellow Shoshoni would probably take as proof of the foreign witch's powers over the animal kingdom. But Broken Nose has little time for the wonders of nature, and sees her only as being lucky.

He pulls himself to a halt as the ground levels out under his feet, stopping just a few yards from the bulk of the bull-mammoth. Its eyes are fixed on the woman, and it makes pained groaning noises when it breathes. Slowly, and with some reluctance, Mme. Cailloux lowers her hand.

'Tout,' she says. (This is the original French, of course, but somehow it makes more sense that way.)

Broken Nose isn't really sure where he should look. It seems disrespectful, somehow, to disturb this union. There they stand, woman and monster, in a communion that would seem almost obscene if it weren't so unlikely. For some reason, Broken Nose remembers a folk-tale from his childhood about a father who had an improper relationship with his daughter, and who was swallowed up by the Earth as a punishment. After a few moments more, he speaks.

'The cargo,' he says, using a word he's more than familiar with even though it's not entirely the right one. 'Our tools...'

It's then that Mme. Cailloux regains her senses, preternatural or otherwise, and turns away from the beast. The mammoth never blinks, though, and never moves its head. The Mademoiselle looks up towards the top of the slope, presumably remembering the packs which she and Broken Nose have left over the rise, the equipment her own "employers" issued her with before transporting her here to the Land of the Shining Mountains. (And just as we imagined Lewis and Clark standing to attention before Jefferson, so Broken Nose imagines Mme. Cailloux standing before Napoleon Short-Arse himself, although he's imagining Napoleon sitting in a position of honor around a roaring fire rather than sitting behind a desk; there is, of course, no Shoshoni word for "furniture".)

So it is that Mme. Cailloux draws away from the mammoth, to begin her slow climb back up the slope, with Broken Nose at her heels. Mme. Cailloux doesn't look back at the mammoth as she walks, something Broken Nose interprets as an almost incestuous shame. And the mammoth doesn't watch her go, simply continuing to stare at the spot where she once stood. So it's left to Broken Nose to glance over his shoulder on the way up the slope, to watch the woolly monster recover its strength after its four seconds' worth of rabid activity, while the rest of the herd-animals go on bellowing and sniffing at each other. He wonders if the bull-mammoth even understands the difference between its human visitors and the other beasts of the wilderness

'These are Mr. Jefferson's animals,' he hears Mme. Cailloux say, halfway up the rise. 'They feed on Mr. Jefferson's grass.'

He still doesn't know what she's talking about. Broken Nose is starting to feel that even the mammoths understand this mission better than he does, but then again, wouldn't you expect him to think that way? Being Shoshoni, when he uses the mammoths as a metaphor the results aren't particularly literary.

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Which leads us back to the President of the United States of America himself, as he sits behind his rosewood desk in his rose-tinted office, picking snuff or hashish or chewing-tobacco out of his little carved box. This is some months in what might be called Lucia's future, so Lewis and Clark have in the last few minutes dutifully marched out of the office in their unlikely racoon-skin hats. No doubt a kayak is waiting for them outside.

But now Mr. Jefferson's alone with his thoughts, and we can make the usual array of guesses as to what those thoughts might be. The President is hoping that his explorers will bring him back news of a Northwest Passage, a trade route that could turn his republic into an empire almost overnight (not that he wants an empire, as such, but... well, you know how it is). And then, of course, there's the prospect of mammoths. If such things are found, they're sure to be given a place of honor in the new American mythology. He briefly wonders if there's room for a mammoth on the national crest; possibly he can put one in place of the eagle. A beast which proves, by its very nature, that the Church is full of asses and the world runs to the will of the new sciences. Just for a second, for a stupid childish second, he imagines riding the back of such an animal in a parade along Pennsylvania Avenue, celebrating his second - oh, to hell with precedent, make it his third - term in office. Jefferson's monsters, that's what the Church would say. He imagines the mammoths' backs being draped in flags, decked out in the red-and-white stripes and the seventeen stars (although the flag which hangs above the window in this particular office only has sixteen, those artisans who handle such things being a little slower than the expansion of the new republic).

All this makes Mr. Jefferson consider the box again. He tries to remember the name of the woman who presented it to him, the well-spoken Mademoiselle who appeared in this very office just a few short months ago, her skins and furs making her look like an Indian coming home from a trek in the great forests. Naturally, it's ludicrous to think that a complete stranger, and such an ill-dressed one, should be allowed to stroll into the Presidential office without even officially presenting herself... but the notion's as hard to resist as all the other things we've seen inside this virtual room. Whether or not the woman did introduce herself, the one thing Mr. Jefferson can remember is what she told him when she placed the little off-white box on his desk.

'Your new world, Monsieur President,' she said. Well, maybe she didn't say "mister" in the French style, maybe Jefferson's just remembering it that way because he likes the accent, but the point remains that when he slid the box open he found inside it just a few blades of green, green grass. Mr. Jefferson fails to remember how he responded to this, or even whether he asked his visitor to explain herself; she may well have vanished from his office

before he could so much as speak (after all, a mysterious entrance should always be complimented by a mysterious exit).

Here and now, the President believes the contents of the box to have been a kind of message, sent by some agency he has yet to identify. In fact, he's only half-right.

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And this is Jefferson's future. More precisely, this is 1805, halfway through Lewis and Clark's two-year excursion into the wildlands, the point at which the two men (and all their followers, though right now they're gloriously irrelevant) finally stumble across a certain indentation in a certain grassland. A crater, if you will. It's here that the two explorers, being consummate outdoorsmen, find trampled ground and traces of spoor which suggest the trail of some grand animal herd. At first they conclude that the Indians have driven their cattle through the area, though this theory falters when they arrive at the bottom of the basin, where the graves have been dug. They assume there are graves here, anyway, given that the ground's been broken from one side of the crater to the other. Now, as not even the Shoshoni would do something as bizarre as grazing their animals on top of their dead - and as a quick search of the area uncovers European musket-balls in the grass - there's obviously some kind of mystery here.

Sadly, it's not one the explorers feel they have time to solve. Besides, even by this stage they're starting to learn that digging up native graves is a bad move, tactically speaking. There's some discussion about what might be called the "central" grave, the fifteen-foot-long tract of broken earth which, from its size, must surely indicate the last resting place of a great leader (proving to the leader-obsessed white men that the people who performed these burials must have been partly civilized, even though the Shoshoni contingent in the expedition claims not to recognize the style). Lewis and Clark steer well clear, deciding to give the mysterious fallen chief the respect he must surely deserve.

Later, in the oh-so-short years between the end of the expedition and Lewis's highly dubious suicide, the duo will theorize that the site was deliberately desecrated by rogue Frenchmen as some kind of political maneuver. A stampede must have taken place at some point, so the large animals, whatever they may have been, were probably used by the French as weapons of destruction.

Like Jefferson, these people excel at being only partly correct.

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And however far into the future we go, Mr. Jefferson, President of the United States of America, fails to understand the significance of any of this. Well, what can we expect? Polymath and philosopher he may be, but he doesn't even understand the significance of the box. The little off-white box which remains in his possession for the rest of his term in office, a gift from one of the very few people who understood exactly what he wanted from his glorious new territory, and knew precisely why he couldn't be allowed to get it. A box Mr. Jefferson might have used for snuff, or hashish, or tobacco, which a Frenchwoman once

claimed was all that remained of his virtual paradise, and which just happened to be made out of ivory.

About the Author

Lawrence Miles has now written eight novels, although he's been known to describe This Town Will Never Let Us Go as "arguably the first one that counts." As the creator of Faction Paradox, his duties have included writing the Faction series for Image Comics and devising The Book of the War (typical critics' assessment: "remarkable"). He's currently developing an unforeseen interest in stage magic, and he's worked out a way of drastically improving the classic Box of Pain trick if anybody's interested. He lives and works within travelcard-distance of London.

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